

An interview with E. Nelson Cohen (1)

E. NELSON COHEN

An Interview Conducted by

Robert Carter

July 10, 1981

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## NARRATOR DATA SHEET

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DATE

Name of narrator: E. Nelson CohenAddress: 144 Barton AvenuePhone: 232-3032Birthdate: 2 February 1924 Birthplace: Terre Haute, INLength of residence in Terre Haute: 57 yearsEducation: Terre Haute public schools, U.S. Navy, graduate of  
Indiana State UniversityOccupational history: Corporate president,  
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E. NELSON COHEN

Tape 1

July 10, 1981

Vigo County Public Library, 1 Library Square, Terre Haute, IN

INTERVIEWER: Robert Carter

TRANSCRIBER: Kathleen M. Skelly

For: Vigo County Oral History Program

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RLC: This is Robert Carter interviewing Mr. Nelson Cohen July 10, 1981, at the Vigo County Public Library.

Now, Mr. Cohen, I'd like to begin with a general discussion about your own growing up in Terre Haute. I understand you're a life-long resident of the community, is that correct?

COHEN: Yes. I was born in Terre Haute 57 years ago. I went to Cruft School for a year, went through Fairbanks elementary school, Sarah Scott junior high school, and graduated from Wiley high school in the Class of 1941. Of course, during this time I was active in all the childhood activities in Terre Haute such as the "Y" Young Men's Christian Association and the Boy Scouts. I also was active within the Jewish community, as a child, at the time.

RLC: What were some of the activities the Jewish child could participate in in the 1920s? You're speaking of the '20s and maybe the early '30s.

COHEN: Mostly, the early '30s and up to 1941. Actually, most of the activities of the child mostly centered around and within the congregation. You know, there was a parochial school in those days, and most children attended the parochial school after regular school. There were youth groups even in those days for the Jewish children.

RLC: Connected with the synagogue?

COHEN: Connected with the congregational life. For those whose parents belonged to the Jewish Country Club there was a summer activity of the Country Club. But in the main, most of us . . . there was really not that much extra-curricular. Jewish life was mostly mainstream Terre Haute life.

RLC: Was there just one Jewish congregation in Terre Haute at that time?

COHEN: No. In the early . . . in the '20s and '30s there were two congregations. In 1934 the two buildings merged under one administrative head, but they maintained two congregations -- a Reform congregation and a Conservative-Orthodox congregation. Those finally merged in its entirety in the South

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COHEN: Sixth Street building in 1960.

RLC: In 1960.

This Jewish school interests me. How long were classes and what did they teach? You say it was after regular . . .

COHEN: It was after regular school. It was usually Monday through Thursday. Nothing was done on Friday since Friday afternoon you had to prepare for the holiday beginning Friday night. Most of it was prayer book reading /and/ the learning of the Hebrew -- learning to write Hebrew. A noble attempt was made to try to teach us conversational Hebrew and translating Hebrew. But like most children, you know, in the earlier days it was not a common practice to learn a language which in those days was considered to be a dead language. However, we should have learned, because Hebrew had now become a living language.

Of course, the boys at age 11 began to study for their Bar Mitzvah ceremony which is at age 13. So, there was a two-year program tacked on to this other schooling.

RLC: Um hm. How long did this school last each day?

COHEN: Approximately an hour. Usually . . .

RLC: An hour?

COHEN: Yes, usually it started about a quarter of four, four o'clock, and we were dismissed at 4:45 to five o'clock.

RLC: About how many children would you say were involved in this . . . when you were?

COHEN: Mmmm. I would say that there could have been as many as 20 children in the afternoon classes every day. Some didn't meet every day. Most of the boys, especially when you turned 11, met every day. And then you had special classes on Saturday morning, usually with your tutor. Some of the girls only met two or three times a week. I can't remember. It's been a long time now.

RLC: The boys and girls didn't meet together. They were . . .

COHEN: They did.

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RLC: They did?

COHEN: Yes, but some of the girls in the younger classes met at different times. It depended upon the family -- what the family wanted out of the school and how much they pushed for certain things.

RLC: Surely.

Well, you didn't duplicate things that were covered in public schools so you didn't . . .

COHEN: No. This was strictly reading and writing and trying to translate the language.

RLC: What was your impression of the Terre Haute schools at the time you were attending the public schools?

COHEN: We always felt that the Terre Haute public school system was very, very good, as evidenced by the fact that most of the children who graduated from high school -- whether it was Wiley, Gerstmeyer, or Garfield or even the Lab School for that matter -- always were well placed in college. You know that many of them had no problem in the transition to the Ivy League schools or to the Big Ten schools. Those were the two major groups that most children went to -- most graduates. But no, I felt that the Terre Haute school system was excellent. It prepared me very well.

RLC: Good.

Do you recall many high school graduates -- Wiley graduates -- going to Ivy League schools? You mentioned this category.

COHEN: Oh, yes, there was always one or two or three out of a class. Of course, they had a great mentor in Winifred Ray, who really took the children who seemed to have some ability and trained them for . . . of course, her pet Ivy League School was Harvard. Some of the other families who had been . . . you know, children of Yale graduates did go . . . one or two went to Dartmouth College. I remember one boy went to Duke University. But you know it seemed in those days -- and, of course, I've been away from the school system now -- that the teachers took an interest in the children and did pursue them on an individual basis to move them into a higher education that would be more suitable for their lifestyle.

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RLC: Right.

What did this Miss Ray teach?

COHEN: Miss Ray taught speech.

RLC: Speech at Wiley.

COHEN: At Wiley, yes. She just died about two weeks ago, I think it was, or three weeks ago. She was 87 or 88 years old.

RLC: And I suppose some students went to the service academies occasionally -- Annapolis and West Point?

COHEN: Yes, there were some. I don't remember right now. As I think back, most of them that I know that went, went as a result of World War II. But I'm sure that there were some prior to that that I wasn't familiar with.

RLC: After the war you mean there was more interest in going into the . . .

COHEN: Well, after the war or during the war I think that one or two that I can remember did opt for the military academy and were accepted.

RLC: I see.

And then many graduates, you say, went to the Big Ten schools such as the University of Michigan . . .

COHEN: Yes, well, they mostly went to Indiana University and University of Illinois, around here. A few went to the University of Chicago and Northwestern. Northwestern had a sizable contingent out of Terre Haute in the '30s. But you know it was with transportation being what it was, 180-200 miles was a viable distance for families to send their children away to school.

RLC: So they could come back on weekends?

COHEN: Go back and forth . . . well, not even on weekend, but it was an easy ride.

RLC: Yes, yes.

Let's get into your business a little bit. You went to Indiana State then Indiana State Teachers' College for four years after attending Wiley, is that correct?

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COHEN: Well, sort of. I enrolled in State and then after my first year I transferred in September . . . let's see, it was 1941. And I went to the University of Illinois. They'd enrolled me. And immediately at Pearl Harbor, I joined the V-12 /reserve officers' training/ program at the University of Illinois.

RLC: (simultaneously) At the University of Illinois?

COHEN: Well, they didn't have it. I just joined the V-12 program, and the following year the V-12s were moved to DePauw University. So, basically, I ended up at Indiana State for my graduation; but the first two or three . . . the first year or so of college life was spent moving around from Illinois to DePauw and then back to Indiana State.

RLC: I see. What was the V-12 program by the way?

COHEN: The V-12 program was basically a type of ROTC program where they took candidates and allowed them to remain in school for a minimum of two years. I don't know why. Some people said the Navy had the idea that for the officer candidate class they'd like to have a minimum of two years of college education. So, that may have been because most everybody went to midshipmen's school after their sophomore year in school. In college.

RLC: I see. But you graduated from Indiana State?

COHEN: I graduated from Indiana State. I think I'm listed in 1947, '48 -- something like that.

RLC: I see.

COHEN: My normal class would have been '45.

RLC: /Nineteen hundred/ forty-five. There was a three-year . . .

COHEN: A three-year hiatus while I was in service.

RLC: Um hm.

What was your major when you graduated from Indiana State?

COHEN: Business and accounting.

RLC: Business and accounting.

And then did you start right in the family business in Terre Haute?

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COHEN: Yes. It was one of those structures -- typical structures -- where you work summers for your family and afternoons you'd run down for an hour or two so that, you know, when you did graduate you could immediately move into a position of . . . wherever it was necessary in the business.

RLC: Right.

Was this business started by your father or . . .

COHEN: In a way, yes; in a way, no. Actually, my grandfather moved to Delphi, Indiana, in 1905. In 1918, he felt that Terre Haute was the queen city of the Wabash Valley and growing and looked like the right spot to move to. So he moved his business to Terre Haute in 1918. In 1919 my father married my mother, and they set up a business similar to the lines of my grandfather's business. So, there were some small differentiations, but basically they were the same. But the roots then really go back to the days in Delphi.

RLC: About 1905?

COHEN: In 1905, yes.

RLC: And would you describe this business?

COHEN: Yes. I guess in the normal category you would call it the junk business. But then the junk business in 1905 was not the same as the junk business of 1981. Everything was located in the county seat. The customers were usually within the parameters of the county seat, because prior to the day of the automobile, of course, the county seat was the commercial hub of the area so that the farmer . . . Well, the normal junkyard couldn't process scrap iron in the winter time because it didn't have the sophisticated equipment that they do today. So they had a diversity of media to work with. What I mean by media . . . the farmer butchered cattle in the fall and in the spring. And the by-product of the cattle was the hides, and usually the junk dealer bought the hides. The farmer also had sheep on his farm. In the springtime when he sheared, he had to get rid of the wool, and usually the junk dealer was the wool handler. And the farmer . . . also in his fields and in his forests or woods usually had medicinal herbs such as mandrake or ginseng or sassafras; and as an adjunct to their income, they would harvest this. And the junk dealer handled it.



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COHEN: One of the products, of course, when we lived in a river town, was the fresh-water shell business for the button industry. And the junk dealer handled that also.

And it wasn't really until the advent of the automobile and the interurban system and the excellent train system that the business began to shift a little bit /to/ where the junk dealer then elected to become a scrap dealer. The scrap iron and scrap metal and that type of thing took more sophisticated equipment, became a more specialized operation. You could reach out 60, 70, 80 miles in order to draw your raw material in. And in those days, which really came in around 1927, '28, '29 -- somewhere in there -- there was a split out of the scrap business. /The/ junk business as we knew it in those days /became/ what we know it today. And our family elected to take the agricultural business. We stayed in the wastepaper end of it. We kept the hides; we kept the furs; we kept the roots, the wool, and the mussel shell business. And that's how we basically started the offshoot. But it was a demographic thing. It was a matter of the advent of the automobile. It was a matter of just the mobility of the people even 40 years ago, 45 years ago.

RLC: It began to greatly increase in the '20s or after World War I.

COHEN: Yes, you had a wider market in which to explore. And, of course, it pyramided itself after 1942.

RLC: Yes.

COHEN: Or '45 /after the war/.

RLC: The Wabash River then played a very important part in this business. You mentioned the mussel shells.

COHEN: Yes. When my grandfather lived in Delphi, of course, the Wabash was an integral part of the city of Delphi. The old Wabash and Erie canal was. . . /as/ you know, that was one of the big way stations on the old Wabash and Erie canal. There were, to my knowledge, no button-cutting plants in Terre Haute, in Vigo County. But in every little town, practically, up and down the river from Terre Haute there was a button-cutting plant. And you know it was a cottage industry of sorts. A man would have, maybe, two or three button-cutting machines that he would cut buttons and then sell what we call the blanks, which were the unfinished buttons, to the button companies in Iowa or to some around the old Mohawk River

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COHEN: valley. These areas had the finishing machines that would cut the designs in them and polish them up. But, basically, it was a cottage industry here in Indiana.

RLC: But your family started it in Terre Haute?

COHEN: We started the collection as a buyers' market. We never got into the button cutting end of it. All we did was act as a harvesting agent.

RLC: Um hmm. For mussel shells?

COHEN: For the mussel shells, yes.

RLC: Are mussels particularly plentiful right around Terre Haute in this part of the river?

COHEN: Well, the Wabash River always was a good river for the growth of mussel shells. I've been asked many times why, and I really am not that much of a scientist in order to determine. I would presume it is because of our high limestone content in the area. Also the river flows just swiftly enough to give some food chain into the mussel beds. Also it originates in areas which have fairly cool water, which the mussel needs to survive on. It's never been -- until recently -- damaged by the flood control systems that the other major rivers have had which tends to change the sediment deposit. After all, they live on the silt. And if you change the flow of the silt, the mussel does change in its life cycle. So that the Wabash basically has always been a good river. It's always had a high-quality shell, as opposed to some of the places in Arkansas or Oklahoma or Tennessee or especially in eastern Kentucky where you have a lot of acid in the water. It's natural, but the texture of the shells changes.

RLC: How about the eastern rivers? Is the Wabash much better than the eastern rivers like the Hudson and Delaware?

COHEN: I can't make any comparison. I know that when the original Germans came to America, they settled in the Mohawk River valley. And they found there a shell of button quality. But because of . . . you know it's an age-old problem, I guess. Because of pollution in the 1870s and 1880s, they had to move from there to the Mississippi River up around Muscatine. Because they were destroying the . . . the pollution in the . . . I guess, Syracuse, Rochester -- I'm not familiar with all those towns up there -- but they

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COHEN. destroyed the river, and the shells didn't reproduce. You know, it takes seven years for a shell to mature and ten years for it to become very commercial. So that you're dealing with a substance that if you destroy its life chain for two or three years, it's a hard problem to bring back.

RLC: Um hm. I see.

Well, your firm took mussels largely from Terre Haute or Vigo County.

COHEN: Yes, actually in the '20s and in the '30s, even, there must have been, oh, 25 buyers on the Wabash River, starting at Mount Carmel and coming all the way up the river to Logansport. And we were just one of the 25. We also, of course, by virtue of being in Terre Haute and in a larger community, we got our fair share mostly because people who maybe wanted to sell some mussel shells would come to Terre Haute because it was a cash crop and after they sold their shells, they could shop. And everybody liked to come to Terre Haute and shop. So the people at Darwin and down in southern Vigo County or, well, across the river in Illinois and even in Clinton, Montezuma, right on up the river, Newport, Covington, right around Attica and on up . . . there was a buyer in each one of these towns. But we got a little bit more percentagewise because some of the diggers did like to come to Terre Haute to shop.

RLC: I see. Well, this indicates that downtown Terre Haute was a . . .

COHEN: Was a going concern, yes. Uh-huh.

RLC: Yes. Uh-huh. And your business was located downtown right on the . . .

COHEN: Our business, yes, has always been within about three blocks of its original location. The original location was where the current . . . the front door of the City Hall is, as a matter of fact. In 1920-something, when my father bought the building, the courthouse had a market completely surrounding it. The market was on 2nd Street, on Ohio, on Wabash . . .

RLC: An open-air market.

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COHEN: An open-air market. People just drove up in their horse and wagon and backed the wagon in, and then it became an outdoor stall, even in the winter time. So that, you know, we were right across the street from this. And then when the city of Terre Haute bought the property to put the new city hall up in 1934, we moved to a building immediately east of the jail on Ohio Street. And we stayed in that until the Urban Renewal project came along in the late '50s, early '60s. And then we moved to our present location, which is at 1st and Cherry.

RLC: First and Cherry.

COHEN: Yes.

RLC: Uh-huh. So, you're right on the river and . . .

COHEN: Yeah. It really had nothing to with the fresh-water shell industry. It's just that the business tended to lend itself to that particular area of town.

RLC: Area.

What percentage of your business is involved with shells, would you say?

COHEN: Oh, the shell business has always been a minor percentage of the industry as a business because you just don't generate that many shells in a river to, you know, to have a sizable . . . it's a commodity that has a limited generation factor. The river can only produce so many tons a year.

RLC: Surely. Uh-huh. And to make a business just out of that, you're saying would be . . .

COHEN: Would be very difficult. As a matter of fact, everybody -- even today -- that's in the fresh-water shell business has other businesses.

RLC: I see. Uh-huh. But it is a profitable business? It's just limited in scope of necessity.

COHEN: Right. Yes. Matter of fact, you know the button business . . . the button people got out of it, because after World War II a lot of people found out that they weren't supposed to wear blue shirts any more with plastic buttons. Everybody got at least one or two white shirts. You know, prior to

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COHEN: (I have a little joke I always tell when I deliver this lecture) World War II, a man had a white shirt. And he got married in it and he got buried in it. (laughs) But after World War II people found out that you were supposed to put on a tie and wear a white shirt whenever you go out. As a result, the demand for buttons . . .

RLC: Increased.

COHEN: . . . exceeded the supply in the rivers. And of necessity, the button companies -- along with Tennessee-Eastman which is a plastics company -- developed plastic buttons. And, of course, they're refining them now. Today, unless you're really an expert and go looking, you can't tell the difference between a good pearl substitute plastic button and a fresh-water or even an ocean pearl button.

RLC: I see. Uh-huh.

I had never thought of mussels as producing pearls before, but of course, they're not the same as oyster-produced pearls.

COHEN: Well, it's a first cousin. You know, there's . . . you have oysters. You have clams. You have fresh-water mussels. You have salt-water mussels. They all have an organ which secretes a pearly substance called nacre. And they all have the same nervous system, which means that if something is agitated or something irritates the flesh of the animal, the nacre will . . . the mantle which is the organ that deposits the nacre will immediately try to send a solution in the animal in order to protect itself.

RLC: I see. Well, have they ever produced pearls, say for necklaces from mussels directly? Or do they come only from oysters?

COHEN: There is an industry, as a by-product of the fresh-water shell industry which is . . . . It's not an industry. It's a by-product called slug, which are really imperfect pearls. There are some perfect pearls found in nature but on a very, very limited scale. We probably buy 100 to 150 ounces a year, even today, of these imperfect pearls.

The classic answer to what is an imperfect pearl is the little pearls that go into sorority and

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COHEN: fraternity pins. Those are the little seed pearls. They bury them in gold or whatever compound and only keep the rounded side, but the other side could be terribly imperfect. You do see some necklaces. You do see some pins made out of what we call baroque pearls, which are pearls of irregular shape. But most of these are foreign to the Midwest, because the high-style markets for pearls are in Los Angeles and San Francisco and New York City. And most of the larger pearls that go into good jewelry tend to gravitate to these markets.

RLC: I see.

COHEN: For years, up until 19 . . . I just got back from Hong Kong. I'm trying to remember what the fellow at Hong Kong told me . . . 1974, I think it was, that the small, grainy pieces that almost look like sand and the pieces immediately above that in the size scale were shipped to Hong Kong. And the apothecaries in Hong Kong ground them up, and it was used for a stomach remedy. After all, it's a . . . you know, a pearl is really calcium carbonate anyway, which is the raw material for Tums or Roloids or any of the stomach medicines. And the Chinese were willing to pay very, very well for that. But now the Chinese themselves have developed a cultured pearl market. And they can produce the slugs, which are the very imperfects, for far less than what we can generate them here in America.

RLC: Oh, really?

COHEN: We've lost that particular market.

The other market that we lost -- and it's just the signs of the time -- was the (I'm using the word, and I don't think it's really true) Arab world. But it also spread clear through to India -- you know, all that area along the Indian Ocean and into the Red Sea area where they always used pearls as a commodity, a jewelry commodity. You know, the sheiks and the rajahs and all those people had pearls stashed away of various sizes. And even in the Indian and the Pakistani and Arabic countries pearls were sewn onto clothing, so that there was a high use of these pearls in that particular market of the . . .

RLC: These were the imperfect?

COHEN: Of the imperfect type. Well, also of the perfect type, more perfect type but of the lesser

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COHEN: type, as a decorative thing. But times have changed. They don't allow the 8-, 9-, 10-, 11-year old children to drill the beads any more. You know a child . . . I understand that the children could ruin their eyesight by the time they were 13, 14 years old with this very demanding work. So, this end of the market also has disappeared.

RLC: But after the war . . . after the plastic button industry began, I understand that you found an opportunity in selling mussel shells to Japan where they were used to produce perfect pearls in oysters. Is that . . .

COHEN: Yes. We became a survivor, because we looked for markets. And as the button industry dropped their sub-buyers along the river, we either put a sub-buyer in to keep the market going or asked them, /the gatherers/ to deliver them to Terre Haute because the transportation by 1955 had become very good. You know, it was nothing . . . everybody owned a pickup truck even in those days.

And we did export some small shell -- thin shells -- to Portugal for children's buttons, and we exported some to Argentina for the button business. But there was not enough market to meet the influx of raw material that we were getting here in Indiana. So, we had to look around. In the mid-'50s, the Japanese had begun to import the Tennessee River shell. They'd always imported small quantities like 20, 30 tons a year. But by 1950-55 -- roughly '55-'56 -- they began to up their import to 100 tons, and then 200 tons and finally by 1960, they had reached something like 4,000 tons out of the Tennessee River.

And they, too, began to look for new markets, and there was a meeting of a marketplace. And the Wabash River shell became a first substitute to the Tennessee River "pig toe" shell. And we took our place then in the Japanese market.

RLC: What was your first encounter with Japanese businessmen? Did they come to Terre Haute of their own accord or did . . .

COHEN: No. My father and mother were on a trip in 1959, and part of the trip was to Japan. Well, it was by design. He wanted to go to look at the market. And he met several people in Japan; and when he came back, he said, "I think I've found the right person that . . . he knows the industry. He's about your

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COHEN: age. He wants to do business. The family has been in the button business for years and they know shells." And so he actually located our primary customer. And, of course, my father died in 19 . . . no, December, 1960. And he had made one other trip, in early '60, to Japan to begin to set up the thing.

But . . . no, my first experience with the Japanese was the following spring of '61. I got off the plane, and I met my principal there. You know that was . . . outside of correspondence, that was my first meeting.

RLC: Where in Japan are they located?

COHEN: in Kobe and Osaka.

RLC: Uh-huh.

COHEN: In the Kansai area.

RLC: Is that the main oyster area?

COHEN: Well, these were the bead makers. You know, it's a long . . . you know, we have the digger here, and then we have the buyer, and then we have the exporter to Japan. Then our counterpart is the importer who sells to the beads makers who make the beads that they implant in the oyster. And the /oyster/ farmer does that. The farmer plants the beads and cultivates the shells. Then the farmer harvests the shells and in turn, sells the . . .

RLC: The Japanese farmer?

COHEN: The Japanese pearl farmer.

I'll call them unfinished pearls, to a pearl finisher.

RLC: I see.

COHEN: Then the pearl finisher checks for the imperfect pearls, and they wash them, and they try to enlighten . . . enhance the color (let's use that word). And then, of course, they sell into the wholesale market for the jewelry business.

RLC: Um hm.

But to Japan you send whole mussel shells or . . .

COHEN: Yeah. Well, the mussel shells ex- the meat, without the meat.



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RLC: Right. Right.

COHEN: The meat's steamed out. But the shell . . .  
we send the shells.

RLC: And how much . . . what quantity are you currently  
sending to Japan per year?

COHEN: Well, it varies year to year. Of course, because  
the Wabash River is no longer as good as I described  
in the earlier conversation, the quality has dropped  
off and the harvesting has dropped off. As a matter  
of fact, we have had severe problems. We're almost  
80% behind in our harvest projections this year because  
of the high rains and then the fact that the Salamonie  
and Mississenewa and the Harden dams are still above  
summer stage. Now the corps of engineers is releasing  
the water. And the shells don't bite. That's a  
term that's sort of indescribable, but they do.  
They tend to cling to a mussel when the river gets  
disturbed like this, you know. The river should be  
at its normal level by now and it's not. So, in  
answer to your question, we export around 650 tons;  
but a lot of it's from other parts of the United  
States.

RLC: So, you get it in from other areas?

COHEN: Yeah, we harvest in Arkansas; we harvest some  
in Oklahoma.

RLC: Oh, I see.

COHEN: We have operated at times in Texas.

RLC: Uh-huh. Your own business?

COHEN: Yes.

RLC: And you find it profitable to go that far  
afield and then sell to Japan?

COHEN: Yes. Well, a shell's a shell within certain  
quality standards.

RLC: Right. Do you ship your shells in by rail to  
Chicago or . . .

COHEN: No, the shells are loaded in a container here  
in Terre Haute and trucked to, believe it or not,  
New Orleans. And in New Orleans, they're loaded  
on a flat car. But the box . . . once we seal the  
box, it's never opened until it arrives in Japan.

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COHEN: And the flat car takes it to -- depending on the steamship company -- either Los Angeles or Oakland /where they/ load it on a container ship and ship /it/ directly to Japan.

RLC: Um hm. Directly to Japan. That's interesting.  
How many trips have you made to Japan?

COHEN: Well, beginning in 1961, this is 20 years. And several years I went two years at a time. So I guess a round estimate is 24, 25 times.

RLC: Oh, my! Have your visits to Japan had anything to do with establishing the sister . . . Terre Haute's sister city as a . . .

COHEN: No. No. I don't even know where the city of Tajimi is.

RLC: I've heard of it. I have no idea where it is. I think it's around . . .

COHEN: I think it's close to Nagoya, which is another 200 kilometer away from Osaka-Kobe area.

RLC: Uh-huh.

COHEN: Yes. I think it was originally . . . Tajimi was . . . the Nagoya area is the pottery area. And that had something to do with the clay in Brazil and a few other things like that. But I'm not sure.

RLC: I see. Uh-huh. I wondered. I think it's been about 11 years now that Terre Haute has had this relationship.

COHEN: Oh, I think it was before that, because I think Mayor Tucker was the one who established it. And he's been out of office 12, 15 years -- something like that.

RLC: Is much business done between Terre Haute and Japan otherwise, apart from your firm? Do you happen to know?

COHEN: I don't have the slightest idea. I know that occasionally people from IMC /International Minerals & Chemicals Corp./ used to go. But whether they go or not now, I don't know. I do know that Hercules, in their new Tenter plant, just put in a complete Japanese system. Of course, they had to go to Japan to check it out, and then they had Japanese technicians

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COHEN: here for six months installing it. So, I'm sure that there is some flow back and forth outside of ourselves. You know, Japan is a very aggressive country; and Terre Haute is not the biggest city in the United States, but it does have some activity that would warrant them looking into.

RLC: I see. Um hm.

Have you noticed in your years as a businessman in Terre Haute foreign trade delegations visiting the city from other countries?

COHEN: Not too many. As you were posing the question, I was thinking back. I can't remember more than, oh, three or four where they were big enough to have their pictures taken and put them in the paper, something like that.

I'm sure that there was . . . as a matter of fact, I'm aware that there are . . . I won't call them trade delegations, but there are people coming to the United States. There was a gentleman /who/ came in a month ago from Columbia . . . Japan-Columbia, whatever it is. I don't know whether it was SONY-Columbia or what, to visit the Columbia Records plant here. As I said, these people from Hercules have been in and out.

I do think that General Housewares has some activity with Japan and probably Taiwan. I don't know.

RLC: Um hm. Um hm.

How about the other way? Have Terre Haute businessmen gotten together to go overseas to look for markets very often?

COHEN: Not to my knowledge. No. No. I sort of go my own way, and nobody's asked my opinions on anything or something to that substance. But basically, no, I don't think . . . I don't think there's that much to export from . . .

RLC: From Terre Haute.

COHEN: . . . from Terre Haute, yes.

RLC: Well, what is your view of the Terre Haute business community as such? Is it well organized? Is there much . . . you say . . . you would indicate

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RLC: that there isn't too much communication at least between your business and other businesses in town. In general, would you say the Terre Haute business community is a pretty organized affair or pretty much the opposite -- each person going his own way, each firm going its own way?

COHEN: Well, I think that the Chamber of Commerce has tried to be a cohesive unit and kept everybody in line. Terre Haute has such a diversity of businesses that I think it doesn't lend itself to trade missions and things like that. Of course, in the last, what, 15 years, the small, individually-owned business has gone by the boards, especially . . . . Well, I . . . you know, just as -- and I don't mean to drop names -- but a classic example, about the only one I can quickly recall to mind which is still really a family-held corporation, is Wabash Fibre Box Company. And 25 years ago, I could have probably named 10 or 15 corporations in Terre Haute of size and substance that were family-held corporations. But they're all gone now.

So, you know, the whole business industry . . . business has changed in that you've lost the individuality of the local citizens being a part of it as opposed to a corporation whose headquarters are outside the city.

RLC: Right.

And, of course, you see the same thing in the restaurant business and hotel-motel business.

COHEN: Yeah, they're all absent . . . well, I won't call them absentee ownerships, but that's a good name for it. It's corporate ownership. Yes.

RLC: But Terre Haute still has Schultz and Meis and Root's which are locally . . .

COHEN: Oh! Root's is not local; Root's is owned by one of the big New York chains. Meis's was sold ten years ago to the Brown Shoe Company, now called the Brown Group out of St. Louis. Schultz is still owned by the Schultz family.

But you look at the industry, and the industry is pretty much corporate now.

RLC: I see. Um hm. Yes. Yes.

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Tape 1

RLC: Do you envision that your family business will continue to remain where it is and work pretty much in the same areas for a long time in the future?

COHEN: Well, you hope so! You know. Although my . . . one of my children is now living in Oregon and another . . . our daughter lives in Indianapolis. You know, that doesn't preclude at any point in time that either my daughter and son-in-law would move back to Terre Haute or my son and daughter-in-law would move back to Terre Haute. It depends on the circumstances at the time. But, as far as the business . . . you know it's being . . . . As a matter of fact, yesterday we were discussing a long-range project which will take us 15 years into the future. So, I guess the answer is I'm interested in Terre Haute, and I think that there is a living to be made here. I wish it would expand. I wish we could find the magic number to make it mature into a city of . . . well, you . . . I led myself into a very, very distasteful part on my part. I feel that the city is really bigger than what it says it is. So you have to look at it as the county. And the county should be something like . . . the county should actually be something like 250,000 people.

RLC: Ideally?

COHEN: Ideally, yes.

END OF SIDE 1

TAPE 1-SIDE 2

RLC: I've felt the same thing myself. What do you think holds Terre Haute back? It has good transportation, plenty of rainfall, a water supply for industry, and . . .

COHEN: I don't know. I . . . I . . . you know, although we didn't say, I've been on the city planning commission since Mayor Leland Larrison appointed me. And he also appointed me to the Vigo County area planning commission. And we discuss this all the time. There seems to be a great reluctance of individuals in leadership capacity to come out and blatantly say this is what the city needs. Everything, unfortunately, to my way of thinking, seems to have to have a political overtone. And I guess I have to say it (and it will be an open quote) it would appear to me that the politics are running Vigo County instead of the people running

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COHEN: Vigo County. You know I liken it to towns like Atlanta and to Kansas City and to Dallas, Houston, Danville /and/, for that matter, Springfield. Decatur, Illinois, is the classic example where the leaders of the community have said this is what we're going to do, and they go out and do it!

RLC: Um hm. Decatur has grown.

COHEN: And Decatur has . . . when I was growing up, Decatur was a town of 30,000; Terre Haute was a town of close to 80,000. Decatur is now almost close to 100,000 and Terre Haute is now down to what? Fifty-one thousand?

And mostly it's because . . . sure, there's been some impetus by Staley -- A.E. Staley & Company -- which has said this is what we want. But by and large, I think that the community as a whole has gotten together and said we want Decatur to grow. And I've discussed this with other people, and I don't know. There always seemed to have been a reticence in Terre Haute for the -- what I consider -- "leaders" of the commercial world to take a real active fight to create the city. We had some dynamic people 50 years ago. The Chauncey Roses who left us Rose-Hulman Institute, the Swope family that left us Swope Art Gallery, even Ben Blumberg who was very . . . a lot of his philanthropic activities are well-known in this city. The Hulman family seem to have done its fair share. But nobody seemed to have coalesced and really have taken a move to create the city . . . There's been a lot of absentee ownership in Terre Haute in the downtown community of land.

RLC: Of land?

COHEN: Yes. And you know, if you're not living here and you're getting your rent check every month, you really don't pay much attention to the everyday problems of Terre Haute. And this is one reason I think that Terre Haute's been terribly inhibited.

Swope is a classic example. We have a great art museum there, and yet they need a new building, and they can't find the finances in order to do it. And yet I'm sure that if you . . . well, Terre Haute's been noted as a town of very wealthy people. And . . .

RLC: More so than Decatur.

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COHEN: Yes, yes!

RLC: I used to live in Decatur.

COHEN: And nobody seems to be able to turn the key to create this impetus. And I think this is part of Terre Haute's problem.

RLC: Um hm. And we've seen downtown Terre Haute decline. I haven't been in Decatur . . .

COHEN: Part of downtown Terre Haute's decline was also, as I alluded to, absentee ownership, you know. There was a lot, a lot. There were some . . . I won't call them mistakes. There were some mis-judgments at the time.

But, you know, you've got prime prairie ground out there surrounding Terre Haute; and why not go out and build the Honey Creeks and the Towne Souths and this and that in prime prairie ground? You have good transportation. You start from scratch. You don't have to worry about hundred-year-old buildings, you know -- to air-condition and to bring up to modern standards, fire protection standards, sprinkler standards. And you do this all from scratch and it does lend itself. Yes, I would like very much to see downtown revitalized. But most down . . . how do you define a downtown? A shopping area? Well, some people say yes. Most people now define downtowns as the financial . . .

RLC: Business, commercial.

COHEN: . . . and office area of the downtown business.

RLC: Not retail.

COHEN: Not retail so much. Yes. Because the retailer really has to be spread out throughout the community in order to . . . because of the easy access to transportation. I don't know what's going to happen now that fuel is becoming higher.

RLC: It should make a difference.

COHEN: It should help mass transportation again, but I don't know. Mass transportation seems to be pricing itself out of existence.

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RLC: Right! Terre Haute's amazing though to provide the bus service that it does for the ridership it gets.

COHEN: We were just discussing that last night, as a matter of fact. And some friend of mine says that the buses really are over-sized. And I said . . . you know, I never paid attention to it. I said . . .

RLC: Evansville has buses half the size.

COHEN: Has mini-buses, yes. So, I presume that . . . maybe this is what I said that there's been a misjudgment here.

RLC: Um hm.

Well, do you envision downtown Terre Haute ever becoming more viable that it is now?

COHEN: Well, unless the town grows, unless you start adding population back into it, why would anybody move back in? You know.

RLC: Um hm. Well, we have the . . . what's now called the Deming Center for the elderly, which seems to be functioning well.

COHEN: Well, that's true. But you can't rely on a person who . . . well, most elderly people, you know, don't go out and what I call impulse buy. You know they buy out of need. And to support a downtown retail business, you have to have people . . . you have to have a large influx of people. What is there? Only what . . . less than a hundred apartments in the Deming Center? You know. And that's not many people to turn out on the streets. Even if they'd put up one at the Terre Haute House, it still wouldn't be many people to turn out on the streets. You need hundreds of people passing through there every day or thousands of people, I guess, as evidenced by Honey Creek. So . . .

RLC: And with the highway now being I-70 instead of U.S. 40.

COHEN: Yes, there's been a lot of factors that . . . I'm very . . . although I'm on the planning commission, I'm very interested to see what the Hocker report is going to say. I think a lot of us are because,



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COHEN: you know, as practical business people everybody's analyzed it. And what's it going to take to turn it 'downtown' around, and the answer is I don't know. And that's a lot of answers.

RLC: Terre Haute has long been somewhat of a transportation center, and I still think it is -- although we don't have passenger rail service any more. What is your opinion of the transportation picture here compared with other comparable towns in the midwest?

COHEN: Well, Terre Haute's no better or no worse than anything . . . sure, it has an east-west railroad and a north-south railroad. It has the spur lines into the farm land, so that there is some grain harvest moving through. Terre Haute ten years ago, five years ago had national headquarters for at least two truck lines, maybe three or four, I don't remember which . . . or regional truck lines. Today it has none.

RLC: Why is that?

COHEN: Well, Eastern Motor Express sold out and they moved . . . Well, eventually, they collapsed and moved everything. But Commercial-Lovelace sold out to Banner Industries in Cleveland, Ohio. They moved the national headquarters to Columbus, I think, or maybe even to Cleveland. The McLaren truck line, which was a regional truck line, sold out to another corporation who has its regional offices or home offices elsewhere. You had . . . going back 20 years ago, you had Green Line. They merged with Bestway and somebody else. And then they have subsequently sold out. So, where you had eight, nine, ten truck lines with their major offices in Terre Haute, you now have none.

RLC: Um hm.

COHEN: So, you know, they talk about a transportation center, but I think that's a figment of their imagination today. I don't think it's there! It's not . . . it's a focal point, sure. You know I-70 and U.S. 41 cross each other. But "big deal." In the United States there are plenty of I-70s and 41s.

RLC: Well, yes, but we . . . for example, there are two four-lane highways between here and Indianapolis and a good four-lane road to Chicago. Highway transportation here is good; and we're near the center of population of the U.S., I think, which is a factor. It keeps moving westward, I guess, but . . .

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COHEN: But I don't see where this really does any good for the city of Terre Haute.

RLC: Um hm. You don't?

COHEN: It's a place . . . you know, I kiddingly say that when you cross the Wabash River, you jump off until you get to St. Louis. Well, there's nothing left. And I don't mean to demean Effingham and Vandalia, but really, you know, they're just small towns out in the prairie -- in the Illinois prairie. And it's the same way. You know, people from Indianapolis say I'm going West. There's nothing 'til I get to St. Louis.

And they . . . you know after all, they misplaced the Interstate to a degree. It's 30, 35 blocks south of downtown Terre Haute (or uptown Terre Haute, whichever person you want to talk to). And they only gave us one, really one cutoff that leads into the mainstream of the city. Most . . . you go into most towns . . . you go to a little town like Danville, Illinois, they got five cutoffs leading into Danville -- into downtown. I've never been able to get an answer as to the reasons why. I couldn't conceive of why they had a cutoff going to . . . the Darwin Road cutoff. Why they spent that money there instead of somewhere else. It goes nowhere. Darwin, Illinois, is a town of a thousand people, you know. Why do you need a cutoff to go to a town of a thousand people? The east part of it is only a mile away from U.S. 40. And it goes into Toadhop, actually, or West Terre Haute. So, I never could understand that.

RLC: Right. And it takes . . . of course, so many towns experience this now. The traffic goes around instead of through. It's inevitable.

COHEN: Yes. We travel a lot by car, and you can leave Terre Haute and travel to Denver, Colorado -- a thousand miles -- and make one traffic light.

RLC: Right.

COHEN: In Lyman, Colorado. And why do you need to stay anywhere? Why do you need . . . your town that relies on transportation or travel is . . . it's really a . . . it's not basic, you know. It helps the hotel industry and the restaurant industry near the interstate but that's about all. They don't shop in the town in other words. Although it does . . .

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COHEN: Terre Haute is a central location of 250,000 population. There are a lot of people that come to Honey Creek [Square shopping mall] from eastern Illinois.

RLC: Yes. Yes.

COHEN: And it is good access.

RLC: Right off the highway.

COHEN: But getting back to your question, no, I don't consider Terre Haute as a major transportation center. It has good transportation, but it's not a major transportation center.

RLC: You would consider Indianapolis a major transportation center, I guess?

COHEN: I would think . . . yes. Indianapolis, Louisville, for sure, because it has three or four modes of transportation.

RLC: The river . . .

COHEN: The river, yes, and good interstate system, good railroad hub system. Yes, I would think that Indianapolis, St. Louis, would be much better.

RLC: Um hm.

Are civic activities in Terre Haute pretty centered in the downtown area? Or are they, as you see them, are they dispersed around the community?

COHEN: I don't quite understand what you mean by civic activities.

RLC: Well, the Rotary, the different service clubs . . .

COHEN: Oh, service clubs?

RLC: . . . I think . . .

COHEN: Well, I presume they meet . . . you know, I'm not a member of any of those particular organizations, but I think that there are downtown clubs. But there are also morning and evening service clubs that meet in the regional areas, I guess. Some of the suburban areas.

RLC: Probably less activity downtown now than there was in the past?

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COHEN: Oh, yes. I mean . . .

RLC: Of that nature.

COHEN: Yes, I mean . . . well, there are less places to go downtown. You know, for years you used to meet . . . one used to meet at the Terre Haute House and one used to meet at the Deming Hotel for lunch. And neither one of them are there. Neither one of them serve, you know. So, it's . . . you can't fault the service clubs for that. That's just the nature of the downtown.

RLC: Right. And there were more restaurants and meeting rooms in general.

COHEN: Yes. Downtown Terre Haute was a focal point. You know, everything converged on it. It was . . . 7th Street and Wabash Avenue was truly the crossroads of Terre Haute, for sure -- probably the crossroads of the nation. But there's nothing there, now.

RLC: Um hm.

You mentioned earlier before we began the recording that there were tearooms and . . .

COHEN: I said, I heard that documentary last Tuesday night on Channel 2 /107/. I guess it was. And they were talking about downtown Terre Haute. Sure. Herz had a tearoom. Root's had a tearoom. There were a jillion restaurants up and down Wabash Avenue. I think even, you know, it used to be . . . as we were growing up, I think we counted there were 27 saloons between the Wabash River bridge and Fruitridge Avenue. And today there are very, very few neighborhood bars along there, especially in downtown Terre Haute. I think only the Saratoga and T's Lounge /remain/. And I don't use . . . mean to . . . you know, the bars; but this is just the nature of the change of the community.

RLC: Um hm. And people would drop in various places just to . . .

COHEN: They were social places. That's right.

RLC: . . . socialize.

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COHEN: Especially in the west end of town. I can't remember the names of them right now, but I do know that from Water Street, which is right there parallel with the Wabash River, to 1st Street there were two taverns that I was very, very familiar with because the family worked in the area there. And then the Indois Hotel was at 2nd and Wabash, and it was a focal point of activity. There were a lot . . . and then as you start up Wabash Avenue -- especially below 5th Street -- there were a lot of workingmen's activities. They'd come into town on Saturday night and shop and . . .

RLC: Saturday night! The stores were . . .

COHEN: Yes, all the stores were open on Saturday night until I think 1939, '40, '41, something like that.

RLC: Really? Uh-huh. So, it must have been a lively . . .

COHEN: It was very live downtown. Yes, Saturday night.

RLC: Saturday night it's totally dead now. (laughs)

COHEN: Now, any night! (laughs)

RLC: Any night.

Have you seen any changes in the Terre Haute Jewish community in your lifetime? Has that . . .

COHEN: Yes. As a matter of fact, I happen to be affiliated with the national organization of the Reformed Jewish movement. And Terre Haute is not alone in these problems. When you reach a town of 100,000 or less, most Jewish communities have the same problem in that the children move away and . . . . Matter of fact, we just took into the movement a little congregation of 25 families. And . . .

RLC: Located?

COHEN: Well, located in Ohio -- in northeastern Ohio. And 50 years ago they were something like 125 families. So, in 50 years they dropped almost 100 family units. And this is what's happening in Terre Haute. As we discussed earlier, there were two congregations, two buildings; we're now into one building. The two buildings . . . I think at the height of the Jewish community in Terre Haute, there probably was somewhere in the neighborhood of 450 to 500 families.

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RLC: And when was the height?

COHEN: Well, I would presume it was somewhere in the '20s or early '30s. Probably late '20s, '25 to '30 -- something like that. Because as the Depression came in 1930, I'm sure (if my memory serves me) some of my friends, you know, their families moved to Indianapolis and Danville and Louisville and whatever because there just wasn't enough to support their families at the time. Now we're down to, oh, I think the membership is listed at 150 families, but there's something like 30 widows on the membership roster. So really, there's roughly 120 family units, husband and wife, you know, of sorts.

RLC: Well, where are young Jewish people moving today? All over or . . .

COHEN: Well, you have to understand . . . All over. But you have to understand that most of the people 50, 60 years ago were family-owned businesses. A father had a business, and he expected his son to come in. Of all of my friends in my age group, I'm the only one who went into the family business and stayed. There were 14 boys and girls in my age group and 13 . . . well, 12 of them have left Terre Haute. And so, you know, with the demise of the family business, the children are going either into the big cities and opening up their own business or they're going into corporate life, and they move wherever they have to move.

RLC: Wherever the corporate headquarters are. Yes.

COHEN: Yes.

RLC: Well, would you like to comment further on anything before we close?

COHEN: No. Just I want to thank the library and whoever is funding the project for allowing me to appear and discuss my thoughts about Terre Haute.

It's been a great city. It's . . . really, I have nothing . . . I would like to see it better. But I feel that Terre Haute's done well by our family, and I'm sure . . . I hope that our family has done well by the city.

RLC: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Nelson Cohen of Terre Haute, and we'll end the interview here.

END OF TAPE

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